



*Gordon Hart with 260 pounds of ice
on his back*

The Iceman Cometh . . . and has Gone!

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for the Goffstown Historical Society*

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It was the most unusual winter -- long periods of below freezing temperatures, no snow and not a storm in sight. The ice on the pond was already 16 inches thick and clear as glass. If you lay down on your stomach and peered down thru the thick surface, you could see the bottom of the pond if the sun was shining just right.

It was perfect for harvesting. That is what they call it when it is time to cut the ice into large rectangles with a marker plow, it's swing glide riding in the previously cut groove, 22" away, cutting about 3" deep on the first pass. Special saws with longer teeth would cut 2" deeper at each pass along the marked surface grooves, first in one direction and then in another, creating a grid pattern. At least 4-5" at the bottom was left uncut to protect the workers and equipment from injury.

If there had been any snowstorms, the ice surface would have to be plowed clear so that the ice would be of good quality, free of any snowy layers, yet it had to be thick enough so that it could hold the weight of a horse drawn plow. The horse would wear special shoes that would keep him from slipping on the icy surface of the pond. This was not a concern this particular year because there had been no snow.

In fact, just the week before, there had been skating parties held on the pond over the holidays because it was a perfect place to try out the new Christmas present, black single runner skates with "figure skater's toe picks", and there was plenty of room for everyone to have a good time - practicing their spins and figure-eights.

It is hard to imagine life without the convenience of modern refrigeration ... and even harder to understand the effort that went into supplying a form of cooling and protection of food supplies that had begun in this town in 1870. It seems as if it was always the coldest day of the year, usually in January, when the ice harvesting began. It was a chance for willing workers to help fill the three-story ice house with hundreds of cakes of ice that would be used by all the families in Goffstown to refrigerate their food.



Gordon Hart with ice coming up into the Ice House

My part-time job was to sit up in the tower overlooking the conveyer belt that pulled the cakes up the ramp towards the storage house. From there, I could see the channel that had been cleared so that each cake could be floated from the pond to the entrance gate and the belt. I controlled the levers that stopped the belt if a cake got jammed sideways and needed prodding with long ice hooks to correct its progress up the ramp. I had a huge bearskin robe wrapped around me for added warmth as the wind whipped through the open tower platform.

Once in a while, they let me work down on the pond with a 10-foot long ice hook so I could help guide the rectangles down the channel that had been broken free from the long strip with chisels or cut with saws separating the remaining 5-inch connection where the cake was still attached at the water depth.

Do you realize that this ice lasted all year long, until the next harvest time?

The ice houses were built with double walls which were filled with sawdust for insulation. More sawdust was needed to pack around the sides of the cakes as they were placed for storage within the building. Two or three feet of the sawdust covered only the top layer. Properly insulated ice could last in an icehouse for 2-3 years. Each cake was placed 3" apart, with no sawdust between each layer as they were stacked one on top of another towards the ceiling of the ice house. With good team work, an ice cake never stopped moving from the time it left the water, went up the ramp, down the chute into the ice room, and finally settled into its place within the building.

Before loading the wagons that would be delivering the ice to the customers, the ice had to be slid down a chute from the ice room, into a "wash pond" to remove the sawdust or other dirt particles, quickly lifted out of the water with tongs, slid along the loading dock and into the back of the ice wagon or truck.

Customers had a price card which they would put in their window facing the street, telling the iceman what size piece they wanted or needed for that day. The price at the top of the card indicated the size. Ice cost about 5-cents for 25 pounds of ice. The iceman would use the ice axe to cut the exact size, weigh it with a spring scale hanging on the rear of the wagon, holding it with tongs as he carried it on his back to the house. He wore a rubber apron on his back to keep his clothes dry and to catch the melting drips so they wouldn't dirty the housewife's floor. Sometimes, he had to use the small ice pick to give a final shaping to the piece so it would fit perfectly into the icebox. After leaving the house, he would tip the back apron so the water would run out.

Ice was delivered to homes in Goffstown, Grasmere and Parker's Station every day, except Sunday. Some homes needed delivery twice a week, depending on the size of the ice box, the amount of food needing to be cooled, and the insulation quality of the wooden ice box. If someone needed ice on a Sunday, they could get it at the Iceman's home, where he would place the cake on the front or back car bumper where it could safely ride back to the home, with minimal dripping and shrinkage if the day wasn't too hot.

There are some ice memories I would prefer to forget. On some occasions, my father had to take my sister and me along on his route with him, because my mother was at work as a telephone operator at the local switchboard on Main Street, or at a meeting. As he made his deliveries, we would entertain ourselves or each other in the cab of the truck. My sister told me to see if I could move a lever that was on the floor ... so I tried. We were parked in front of Pierce's Drug Store and the Congregational Church. My mother was conducting a meeting of the Unity Club in the church at that moment . . . when she heard a terrible crashing noise that seemed to continue for minutes ... and she knew that sound! I had lifted the dump body of the truck and sent all the cakes of ice out careening onto the Main Street of town. It meant that we had to begin at square one and reload the truck at the ice house to continue the home deliveries, after my father had moved all the ice out of the traffic lanes on the street. I wish he had scolded me, but the silent look that he gave me was painful enough and spoke volumes.

Children loved to see the Ice Man coming because they knew he would shave off slivers of ice from the big cakes and give them to eager hands on a hot day, almost better than the musical ice cream truck that covers the streets of town now-a-days.

Does anything taste better than a dish of cold ice cream ... your favorite flavor? It is so easy to open the freezer section of your refrigerator and help yourself.

It was not always that easy. If you were a child in the early 1900's ice cream was a once-in-a-while summer treat that required the long process of mixing together the recipe for a vanilla -egg-milk-cream-sugar custard plus your choice of fruit or nuts, pour the mixture into a metal container placed inside a wooden bucket, attached to paddles and a turning crank and handle, keep adding chopped ice and coarse salt to surround the container so that the custard would chill and firm up to a thick pudding texture. You'd have to take turns being the chosen one to lick the paddles when they were removed from the ice cream. Now, that is a pleasant memory!

The Goffstown Historical Society has an exhibit of all the ice harvesting equipment that was used by the Edward M. Hart & Son from 1912 until 1952. During that final year, after the ice house roof collapsed, manufactured ice had to be purchased from Concord in order to accommodate the remaining customers in Goffstown who did not yet have electrical refrigerators



Hart's Ice Pond, Mountain Road, Goffstown, New Hampshire